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THE MODERNIST MOVEMENT IN THE CHURCH OF ENGLAND

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"Modernism," originally used of a special movement within Roman Catholicism, is now used of the liberal movement within other churches. It represents a way of approach rather than a set of opinions. Important stages are marked by (1) *Essays and Reviews*, (2) *Lux Mundi*, (3) Thompson's *Miracles in the New Testament*, (4) the Girton Conference of 1921, Privy Council Judgments, and Resolutions of Convocation.

The strength of the movement is focused in the Churchmen's Union, but is widespread in academic circles, among the parochial clergy, the older laity, and still more among the younger (Student Christian Movement, etc.). Modernism is an attempt to meet the difficulties of the two latter sections.

Concerning the attitude of the Church, the Extremists are definitely hostile, but responsible leaders recognize that Modernism has a serious message, and many both among Evangelicals and Anglo-Catholics are anxious to come to terms with it. There is danger from the "left wing"; this, however, does not direct the policy of the movement in England. Two main problems present themselves: (1) a restatement of religion which shall be a gospel and preserve the fundamental values of the past; (2) the question of honesty involved in assent to creeds and formularies which embody the ideas of a past age.

"Who gave you this name?" is a question which may be addressed to parties no less than to individuals, and the god-parents responsible are often popular instinct and the press. It is so with Modernism. It was first applied to the movement within the Roman Catholic church, of which Loisy and Tyrrell are the best known exponents. This movement was prepared to go to extremes in criticism and philosophy, while apparently keeping intact all the doctrinal formularies and the whole working system of Catholicism. It distinguished the Christ of

faith from the Christ of history, and extended Newman's doctrine of development to lengths which would have astonished its originator.

Many would wish still to confine the term "modernism" to this particular school. But the god-parents who preside over such things have bestowed it upon a wider movement. It has come to be the popular designation of what was formerly called the broad, or liberal, school in the Anglican church. Many, indeed, of its adherents regard the name with some distaste, and we find, for example, the somewhat confusing spectacle of a prominent liberal such as Dean Inge inveighing in no gentle terms against "Modernism." In such cases it must be understood that what he is attacking is the Continental variety with its handful of representatives from other churches. But, generally, the term is now accepted in the wider sense; it has probably come to stay and it is obviously convenient. "Broad Church" suggests a somewhat negative and academic outlook; and "liberal" has associations with politics. We shall therefore use the term "Modernist" as denoting the movement in the Anglican church, and, indeed, in other churches, which believes that religion needs to be interpreted afresh to the modern man and that it can be so interpreted without the loss of any essential element. It is prepared to welcome without reserve the results of historical criticism and scientific discovery with their new outlook on the world. It strives to preserve a real continuity with the past and is resolved to work within the church to which its adherents belong. At the same time it recognizes in varying degrees that the time has come when services, formulas, and doctrinal statements require revision. It needs, however, to be said very clearly that Modernism is not primarily the acceptance of a set of opinions and new dogmas, critical or scientific. Any given Modernist may or may not believe in the Virgin Birth, or the empty tomb, or the apostolic authorship of the Fourth Gospel. The essence of Modernism lies, not in its

conclusions, but, in the way they are reached and the temper in which they are held. Modernists agree that we can no longer appeal to the authority of Bible, creeds or church as something fixed and decisive; they agree that the Spirit of God is speaking in divers channels and by divers voices and that we must be ready to hear all that He saith to the churches; and they agree that truth flourishes best in an atmosphere of freedom and that the church must be brave enough to suffer a great variety of opinions within its walls.

What have been the main stages in the development of this movement?¹ Not to go too far back, we may mention the publication of *Essays and Reviews* in 1860. This was a collection of essays written, as is well known, by prominent members of the Church of England, including Temple, afterward Archbishop of Canterbury, Mark Pattison, and Jowett. The positions taken up would in most cases be regarded today as very moderate, but the book was received with a storm of indignation. An archdeacon spoke of it as containing all the poison which is to be found in Tom Paine's *Age of Reason*, while it had the additional disadvantage of being written by clergymen. It was denounced in Convocation, and proceedings were taken against two of the contributors. They were sentenced to a year's suspension by the Court of Arches, but acquitted by the Privy Council, the main point at issue being whether the formularies of the Church of England required a belief in everlasting punishment. This Privy Council judgment vindicated the position of the Broad Church party, as it was then called, in the Church of England. It should be carefully noted that the same court vindicated the position of the Evangelical party in the Gorham case, and of the High Church party in the Bennett case.²

¹ The writer would venture to refer the reader for fuller details to his discussion of the subject in *Conscience, Creeds, and Critics* (Macmillan & Co., 1918).

² In the Gorham case the point at issue was Baptismal Regeneration, in the Bennett case the doctrine of the Eucharist.

The Privy Council is a lay court and a State court, and its jurisdiction is vehemently objected to by many High Churchmen. One of the main arguments urged in favor of disestablishment is that it would enable the Church "to rid itself of this incubus," and to decide its heresy trials by purely ecclesiastical courts. It is interesting to speculate what would have been the position of the Church of England today if this had been the procedure during the nineteenth century; for in each of the cases referred to above the lay court stood for freedom, while the ecclesiastical court proved itself conservative and narrow.

A further stage was marked by the publication of *Lux Mundi*. It showed that a large section of the High Church party was prepared to accept Old Testament criticism almost without reserve, refusing, e.g., to regard *obiter dicta* of Christ as decisive evidence of the Davidic authorship of Psalms. With regard to the New Testament it was more hesitant, and it is only fair to the writers to point out that they regarded their position as completely in harmony with the main trend of the teaching of the Fathers and with the pronouncements of Councils. Without going into the manifold questions raised by this position, the important point to notice is that it proved that biblical criticism and a recognition of the teachings of modern science had now established themselves in the center of church life.

Our next landmark may be the publication of Mr. J. M. Thompson's *Miracles in the New Testament* (1911). The writer definitely rejected miracles as ordinarily understood. He was deprived of his license by the Bishop of Winchester, who had jurisdiction over the college to which he belonged, and there followed a deluge of pamphlets and sermons on both sides of the controversy. The most definite outcome was a debate in the spring of 1914 in the Upper House of Convocation, the assembly of the diocesan bishops of the Church of England. A petition was presented by the Churchmen's

Union demanding freedom to study and discuss critical problems and to publish the result of studies, and also urging that a wide liberty of belief should be allowed with regard "to the mode and attendant circumstances" both of the Incarnation and of the Resurrection. A resolution was carried in which the Bishops expressed their resolve to maintain unimpaired the Catholic faith as stated in the Creeds. The most important paragraph may be given verbatim:

We express our deliberate judgment that the denial of any of the historical facts stated in the creeds goes beyond the limits of legitimate interpretation and gravely imperils that sincerity of profession which is plainly incumbent on the ministers of Word and Sacrament. At the same time recognising that our generation is called to face new problems raised by historical criticism, we are anxious not to lay unnecessary burdens upon consciences, nor unduly to limit freedom of thought and enquiry, whether among clergy or among laity. We desire therefore to lay stress on the need of considerateness in dealing with that which is tentative and provisional in the thought and work of earnest and reverent students.

This resolution was markedly cautious and conciliatory. The Bishops, it will be seen, refused to condemn any book or statement explicitly, or to encourage prosecution. A good deal had gone on in the background before the debate and the official resolution, and no doubt something had been sacrificed on both sides in order to retain episcopal unanimity in the face of the public.

Attention was soon occupied by the more immediate issues of the war, but the question of Modernism came to a head in the Conference held at Girton, Cambridge, in August, 1921. The Conference was organized by the Churchmen's Union, and its subject was the Person of Christ and the Creeds. For some reason the attention of the press was attracted; it was a slack season and the public was waiting for the arrival of Charlie Chaplin. Fragmentary and misleading reports of some of the papers appeared with scare headlines—"Dean denies Divinity" and the like. It is hardly worth while going into

the whole story. Sensible people recognized that such fragments could not be relied on as giving the whole truth, and this view was fully confirmed when the papers were published in full in the *Modern Churchman* of September, 1921. But public attention had now been drawn to the whole subject. The average man had known vaguely that something was going on in the direction of the spread of modern ideas among the clergy. Now he began to talk about Modernism himself in his club and workshop. The Modernists had not engineered the advertisement, but their opponents had given them a boom such as the most astute of publicity agents might envy. It was realized on all sides that Modernism was very much alive and must be taken seriously. The case could no longer be met by sarcastic references to "the sterile party" or to "a handful of academic liberals."

Two definite attempts were made to stem the tide. The Rev. C. E. Douglas seized a broom which broke very quickly in his hands. He delated Mr. Major for heresy on the ground of his denial of the physical resurrection of the body. In the choice of the person to be attacked he showed a sound instinct. Mr. Major is editor of the *Modern Churchman*, the chief organ of the Modernist movement in England; he is also principal of Ripon Hall, Oxford, a theological college for the training of ordinands. Not having the status of a beneficed clergyman, he might not be so well protected as those who enjoy "the parson's freehold" in a living; for the Established Church gives a very secure tenure to its incumbents.

But the ground on which he chose to fight was less well-selected. It is not only Modernists who, while believing wholeheartedly in Immortality as the full survival of the personality, reject any idea of a resurrection of the flesh or the physical particles of the body. A condemnation on this issue would have involved a great mass of central church opinion, and it was no surprise when the Bishop of Oxford, having sought advice from three of the leading theological

professors of Oxford, refused to proceed with the prosecution.

The second line of attack was a series of attempts to persuade the Bishops to condemn the Girton Conference. A petition was presented by the English Church Union calling attention to "erroneous interpretations" concerning the Godhead of Christ and the doctrine of the Trinity, urging that by these opinions the minds of many had been deeply distressed, enemies of the faith greatly encouraged, and the honesty of the clergy as a body seriously called in question." The petitioners, therefore, desired the Bishops "to declare that such opinions are contrary to the teaching of the Bible and the Church."

It is no secret that strenuous efforts were made to secure the desired result. But once more a counter-petition, with few but weighty signatures, was organized by the Churchmen's Union, and important debates took place in the Convocations of Canterbury and York in May of this year. The Convocation of Canterbury passed a resolution declaring its own adhesion to the teaching of the Nicene creed and calling attention to the fact that the church commissions as its ministers those only who have solemnly expressed such adhesion. It went on:

Further, this House recognises the gain which arises from enquiry, at once and reverent, into the meaning of the Faith, and welcomes every aid which the thoughtful student finds in the results of sound historical and literary criticism, and of modern scientific investigation of the problems of human psychology; and it deprecates the mere blunt denunciation of contributions made by earnest men in their endeavour to bring new light to bear upon these difficult and anxious problems. At the same time it sees a grave and obvious danger in the publication of debatable suggestions as if they were ascertained truths, and emphasises the need of caution in this whole matter, especially on the part of responsible teachers in the Church.

The York Convocation adopted a report to much the same effect.

Two points deserve to be noted. (1) In spite of the strong pressure brought to bear, the Bishops definitely refused to issue any condemnation either of the Girton Conference itself or of any specific statements made at it. They recognized the absolute necessity of free and full discussion and the futility of *ex cathedra* pronouncements. (2) They went distinctly further in their welcome of the Modernist movement than did their predecessors in 1914.

What then is the strength and extent of this movement? It is focussed in a society already referred to, The Churchmen's Union for the advancement of liberal religious thought. Its objects are:

1. To affirm the continuous and progressive character of the revelation given by the Holy Spirit in the spheres of knowledge and of conduct.
2. To maintain the right and duty of the Church of England to restate her doctrines from time to time in accordance with this revelation.
3. To uphold the historic comprehensiveness of the Church of England.
4. To defend the freedom of responsible students, clerical as well as lay, in their work of criticism and research.
5. To promote the adaptation of the church services to the needs and knowledge of the time.
6. To assert the claim of the laity to a larger share in the government and responsible work of the Church.
7. To foster co-operation and fellowship between the Church of England and other Christian churches.
8. To study the application of Christian principles and ideals to the whole of our social life.

Its activities are varied. Perhaps the most important are the support of the *Modern Churchman*, the monthly magazine already referred to, and the organization of conferences for the discussion of modern problems. The Council includes among many others Bishop Hamilton Baynes, Dean Inge, Dean Rashdall, the Master of Marlborough, the Rev. C. E. Raven, and Miss Maude Royden, a sufficiently varied selection which emphasizes the feature already referred to, that modernism is not the acceptance of a set of opinions. For

there cannot be many questions in which the Dean of St. Paul's and Miss Royden see eye to eye, except in this fundamental principle of the need of absolute freedom.

It is interesting to note that an American Modern Churchmen's Union is in process of formation, of which the organizer is Dr. McComb, Professor of Pastoral Theology at the Episcopal Theological School, Cambridge, Massachusetts.

The Churchmen's Union is important and representative, but the Modernist movement itself is very much wider. We may perhaps distinguish the following classes:

1. There are many in academic circles, theologians and others, who share the general point of view, but have the reluctance of the scholar to associate themselves with any movement of a propagandist or popular kind. But in any crisis they are, as will have been seen, ready to range themselves unreservedly on the side of liberty of thought within the church.

2. Not a few among the parochial clergy are semi-Modernists or crypto-Modernists. Often they have not fully thought out their own position. They are modern in Old Testament criticism, but not in New Testament criticism. Or they are prepared to apply critical methods to the Bible in general, but hesitate to do so with regard to doctrines touching the Apostolic Succession or the Sacraments. Others share the dislike to be associated with a party; a few, perhaps, are afraid to avow their position.

3. Again among the older laity, a large number both of men and women, in their private thoughts and in conversations among themselves, practically take up the Modernist point of view, though they may not be able to state their attitude in precise theological terms. But they believe that the church and its ministers are still committed to an old-fashioned traditionalism. When they have tried to formulate their ideas or their problems to a parson, they have often chosen their confidant badly, and found themselves repulsed

with a snub or a jest. Accordingly they have preferred to keep their thoughts to themselves, and not a few of the clergy still believe quite seriously that there is no modernism in their congregations. Sometimes the laity of whom we are speaking continue to attend the ministrations of the church in a detached and rather cynical mood; sometimes they absent themselves almost entirely. But they have not ceased to care for religion or for their church.

4. Younger folk may be regarded as forming a class of their own, differing from their elders in that they are more articulate and have a clearer idea of what they want. In the Student Christian Movement and similar organizations they have learned to discuss religious problems with the completest frankness in the light of modern knowledge, and they are not afraid to express themselves. They have also found a Christian fellowship with their like which cuts across the divisions of the churches; they are impatient of denominational barriers and resent being herded into separate pens for worship and above all for the Holy Communion.

These younger people are not primarily interested in critical or historical questions, such as the authorship and date of books of the Bible, the evidence for miracles, or the origin and history of Episcopacy. They are prepared on these points to accept the conclusions of the experts. But they want a religion which is clear and intelligent in the fundamentals, which will help them to rebuild a world which seems to them to be falling in ruins, and which will make co-operation and fellowship the ruling principle between nations and between classes. With all their suspicion of dogma they have no use for a religion which does not give the central place to Christ, and they wish to be able to give an intelligible reason for doing so.

It is this concern for a right scale of values which explains the influence among them of Dean Inge, in spite of the fact that they are often out of sympathy with much of his outlook on social questions.

This group is inclined to despair of all the churches as at present organized. They are watching anxiously and critically to see whether they can rise to their new opportunities. If they fail, they are probably prepared to start a new organization of their own.

It is with these two last classes that Modernism is especially concerned. It is its task to persuade them not only that religion can be saved, but that the church can be saved, if they will come in and share in the work of transforming it from within. The Modernist can assure them of a welcome and of a sympathy which understands their difficulties and is prepared to meet them frankly.

What then is the attitude of the church as a whole toward Modernism? It is undoubtedly more favorable than might appear on the surface to one who knew only the church press, especially in its correspondence columns, and certain of the platform and pulpit utterances on the subject. The somewhat violent and indiscriminating utterances here found no doubt represent a real body of opinion especially among evangelicals and the more advanced Anglo-Catholics. A leading article in a church paper wrote as follows: "Toleration is extended to us [the Anglo-Catholics] on the supposition that we will extend the same toleration to Protestants and Modernists. Things may be different when it is found that Catholics have not lost their missionary zeal, that they believe that they alone are loyal members of the Church of England, and that they are not willing to lie down with Protestants and Modernists in the same bed." And if the Church of England were disestablished and the extremists succeeded in capturing the machine (and they are well organized and know exactly what they want), the position of Modernists in the Church of England might become very critical. It may be noted that this would react on other churches, in America and the colonies, which are in communion with her. From her historic position she to some extent gives the lead to the daughter churches,

and especially to those who are included in the Lambeth Conference of Bishops. As long as she herself remains comprehensive, they are not likely to narrow themselves unduly, but if, under the circumstances indicated, she expelled Modernism from her own borders, the position of the Modernists in other churches would become very precarious. But though Modernism has need to watch the situation carefully there is no ground for despondency. As has been said, the intransigent elements are very vocal, but there are other forces working for peace and for understanding.

Attention has been called to the attitude of the Bishops. Under the leadership of the Archbishops of Canterbury and York they undoubtedly realize three main factors in the situation.

1. Modernism has on any view a good deal to say for itself on critical and historical grounds. The leaders of the church are alive to the warnings of history, which show how often the heresy of one age has become the orthodoxy of the next. Official condemnations and loud popular outbursts have only served to make the church ridiculous and are obviously not the right means for the delicate task of disentangling truth from error.

2. The church leaders understand the paramount importance of meeting the younger people sympathetically, and it is a constructive Modernism which seems best fitted to do this.

3. The supply of ordination candidates gives rise to much anxiety, both in number and quality. Unless a full recognition is given to a temper of mind which, while remaining essentially Christian, accepts the modern outlook, there is little prospect of persuading the best and most intelligent of the younger men to give themselves to the ministry.

On such grounds as these far-seeing men in positions of responsibility, while they may not agree with many of the Modernist positions, are yet sincerely anxious to keep the

ring, to secure a fair discussion of present-day problems on the basis of argument rather than of an appeal to authority, and to encourage the movement itself to develop on sane and Christian lines.

There are many in both of the other great parties of the church who are prepared to adopt much the same attitude. At an Evangelical Conference at Cheltenham a year ago a markedly respectful and sympathetic hearing was given to Modernist representatives. As is well known, the Church Missionary Society is sharply divided on the question of its attitude to biblical criticism. But a recent conference of representatives of both points of view arrived at a statement which included the following: "After prayer and long and anxious conference and with an ever-growing consciousness of the presence of the Holy Spirit in our midst, we have been drawn closer together in a deeper understanding of the movements, intellectual and spiritual, which have been influencing many of us." Those who have begun to fear lest haply they may be found to be fighting against God are at least prepared to be tolerant.

In the same way there is a large and influential element among the Anglo-Catholics which realizes that Modernism has a message and that a sympathetic understanding is both desirable and possible. This section is perhaps more disturbed by criticism of the Creeds and the church system, including Sacraments and Orders, than by criticism of the Bible. None the less many of the younger men, especially those who are prepared to think and read, accept for themselves so many of the Modernist positions that they can hardly become parties to a wholesale condemnation. A good deal depends on which element in the Anglo-Catholic party succeeds in directing its policy.

Some would say that the chief danger to Modernism lies in its left wing. The difficulty is common to all live and progressive movements, whether in religion or in politics. At

the moment the chief representatives of this wing are two well-known English scholars now settled in American universities. Professors Lake and Foakes-Jackson. To many modernists their position seems equally vulnerable both from the religious and from the critical side. In particular they are dissatisfied with their attitude to Christ. They do not make it clear in what sense he can be regarded as the founder of the Christian religion or what, if any, is the relation of the believer to him today. Their views have in fact been explicitly disavowed by most of the leading representatives of English Modernism, and both the scholars in question have retorted by unsparing criticism of what they regard as a compromising and weak-kneed attitude. It is, then, not unfair to emphasize the undoubted fact that such scholars with all their brilliance and learning have failed to carry with them the great majority of their friends and former associates. These hang back not from timidity or fear of consequence, but in the last resort because they do not believe that the critical and historical position presented by such extremists is really sound. A left wing cannot be regarded as compromising a movement unless it directs its policy, and at present, at least, the policy of Modernism and of the Churchmen's Union is in quite other hands.

There would seem to be two crucial problems which Modernism has to solve in the near future. Can it make good its claim to be constructive? A destructive stage is often necessary; there is rubbish and there are false beliefs to be cleared away. The Book of Job is mainly a piece of destructive criticism; the writer found in the field certain beliefs as to the meaning of suffering which he regarded as untrue to experience and derogatory to God. He destroys these beliefs, though he is not yet clear what solution of the problem he can put in their place. Such a process, though it does not carry us the whole way, is always a clear gain to religion. But the present situation has its peculiar difficulties; it is, for example, very differ-

ent from that which faced the Reformers of the sixteenth century. Then it seemed only necessary to get rid of accretions and superstitions, and the original gospel would stand out once more. But now more is required than the clearing away of such accretions. Historical Christianity has seemed to imply a view of the world, its origin, its fall, the method of its redemption, a view of the relation between God and man, between Heaven and earth, which is to many untenable in an age of evolution with its wider conception of the universe. There must be a thoroughgoing restatement of religious beliefs, such as will harmonize with the new outlook; the question is whether it can preserve the original and fundamental values. Modernism believes that it can, and there are abundant signs that it is feeling its way toward a restatement which will be a gospel to the modern world, which will have a dynamic strong enough to save souls and which will prove its power to regenerate society. The Modernist believes this, because he believes in the living spirit of Christ.

The second question is less fundamental, but equally urgent. It concerns the question of honesty and sincerity in a period of transition. A grave problem is presented by the requirement of assent to Creeds and Articles which belong to a pre-critical period, and by the constant use in prayers and hymns of language which by common consent can no longer be taken in its literal and historical sense. This problem presses most hardly on the sensitive conscience and particularly on the conscience of many of the best men who are contemplating entering the ministry. Can this problem be solved? Under the pressure of Modernist discussions it is coming to be widely recognized that there is such a problem and that it needs to be taken very seriously, and public opinion is moving in a direction which will profoundly modify the whole idea of assent and subscription to doctrinal formularies. Negotiations on the subject of reunion of the churches have thrust it into the forefront. The Anglican Church lays down acceptance

of a creed as a condition of reunion. The Free Churchman retorts that he can only accept a creed if it is clearly understood that it is not to be regarded as final or absolute, and that the assent, both of laity and of ministers, must be subject to a wide latitude of interpretation of individual clauses. There are signs that such a position may be accepted on the Anglican side, even in quarters where such acceptance might have seemed very improbable. This implies the recognition of the attitude toward creeds, for which the Modernist has long been contending. But the difficulty of conscience will not be entirely removed until some such position has been explicitly recognized by the church.

We have spoken of these two points as problems which face Modernism, but they are really problems which face the churches as a whole. It is not too much to say that the survival of Christianity, as at present organized, largely depends on the ability of the churches to solve them. Modernism has its contribution to make. And this is why many who disagree profoundly with some of the Modernist positions yet feel themselves impelled to confess, "except these abide in the ship, ye cannot be saved." The questions raised by the new knowledge are too vast for any one school or any one church. They can only be solved if all men of good will, representing different traditions and different outlooks, are willing to co-operate unreservedly in a spirit of mutual understanding and of Christian fellowship.